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## WHAT IS CHRISTIANITY?

If the tendency to state Christianity in its simplest forms means also a growing distrust of the differences which separate us into hostile camps, it would seem to indicate that an irenic temper is to be one of the distinctive characteristics of our new age. But it is too early to predict, especially as none of these simplifying efforts have succeeded in winning universal acceptance. The sweeping omissions and implied negatives, in spite of some real contributions to doctrinal analysis, have resulted in more distrust than assurance.

Every generation, however, needs these incisive inquiries, whether the answers prove wholly satisfactory or not. We are disposed, therefore, to welcome all such attempts as this one by Dr. Brown.<sup>1</sup> Indeed it could have been less introductory and even more broadly historical and decisively scientific than we find it.

The author calls his book a study in the history of definition. And he believes that in studying the historic definition of Christianity we are really retracing the rise and progress of the effort to conceive of Christianity scientifically. The book is therefore written in a historic spirit and for the purpose of emphasizing the scientific method in theology. His conception of what constitutes a scientific definition is very general. It is that which is open to universal test, that which is recognized as valid by large bodies of men, that which successive generations of Christians have found distinctive in the religion of Christ. He, therefore, thinks it cannot be too often insisted that the Christianity of which alone science is able to take cognizance is a historic religion. It is that historic religion which began at a definite time and place, has passed through certain specific stages and undergone certain definite changes, which science recognizes, and which it seeks to define.

The problem set before the church has been to discover the definite characteristics which separate Christianity from all other known religions. The author is, of course, well within bounds when he concludes that if we cannot discover what Christianity is it is hopeless to try to defend it. And he believes that not merely the scholar but the man on the street needs to know what Christianity is that he may be able to order his conduct accordingly. In other words, he wishes to get a definition which shall be valid for man as man. And because good men differ, we need an appeal to some wider standard. This he

<sup>1</sup> *The Essence of Christianity: A Study in the History of Definition.* By WILLIAM ADAMS BROWN. New York: Scribner, 1902. xi + 332 pp. \$1.50, net.

finds in the appeal to history, which, he says, must be final. Exactly why this should be true does not appear so evident, for the historic appeal has to rest back on those very differences of good men from which he says appeal must be taken. These statements will give the reader the principles on which the book has been written, and, I suppose, also by which it should be judged.

The book is largely made up of historical material, and is interesting and valuable for this reason. Especially is this true of the many footnotes, which not only fill out the text that would otherwise have been misinterpreted, but in some instances correct it. Yet, after all this has been said, it is still true that the method employed gives us only a study in history and not really the organic and fundamental development as a whole. This is particularly noticeable in the chapters on "The Ancient Church," and "The Reformation Period," where one is constantly surprised. For example, Barnabas has a place in Dr. Brown's book which the early history of the church hardly bears out. And one is not prepared for the selection of Zwingli, and the sweeping neglect and positive dethronement of Luther and Calvin. Evidently Barnabas and Zwingli play only an illustrative and pictorial part in the author's sketch. This is not saying that what is written in these two chapters is not interesting, but that it is far from being the historical and scientific method of treating the subject which Dr. Brown's correct conception of history and his own historical ability would lead us to expect.

Also what he says of the early church is hardly more than true as a broad generalization. Christianity, he says, is conceived physically rather than ethically, as a new divine nature, of which one becomes partaker through the sacrament and by the possession of which one is assured of a life of endless bliss hereafter. That the early conceptions were not purely ethical is certainly true, but it is also true that they cannot fairly be characterized as physical. The Christian ideal of Ignatius is not a mere physical life of endless bliss, but "attaining unto God." What Ignatius seems to emphasize is that we shall not possess death but live forever "in Jesus Christ," which even after a manner of speech could hardly be characterized as conceiving of Christianity physically. His new "divine life" is realistically spiritual if it is anything. The same may be said of the fundamental conceptions of Hippolytus, Athanasius, and others. I speak of this simply to note the fact that the author's positives are stronger than his negatives, which often are so sweeping and general as to misrepresent those whom he characterizes.

As to the Latin church, he thinks that at the root of varying Catholic conceptions lies a view of God as the Absolute which isolates him from the world as a purely transcendent Being, and as such conceives him as raised above the laws of human thought and experience, only to be known through the supernatural revelation which he has been pleased to impart to his church. And where this is the case, he declares it impossible to relate Christianity rationally to other forms of human thought and life. Between it and all other sides of human experience there is a great gulf fixed. This, of course, as a generalization may be true, but it is a sweeping generalization which the author would be the last to push. The reader will notice that it is more a trend or tendency, than the absolute definition of Catholicism which is being passed hurriedly in review. The author certainly cannot be giving a scientific and final proposition. Catholic Christianity, whatever else it may be, is distinctively and definitely a historical religion, too much so in the conception of the mass, which is the historical run mad.

After bringing together from Luther, Melancthon, and Calvin statements bearing on both sides of the question, he makes the sweeping assertion that

when all is said, it remains true that the Calvinist, as little as the Lutheran, attains to what is worthy to be called a truly historical conception of Christianity, and that with them all the point of departure is speculative and *a priori*; that the idea of true religion is constructed from Scripture, reason, and present experience, and thus carried back in principle to the beginning of time.

Here it is easy to understand the point which the author is seeking to make, but how can it be true, as he declares, that the Reformers had a speculative and *a priori* point of departure if they constructed their idea of true religion from Scripture and present experience? If ever a theology was not *a priori* that of the Reformers was not. It is time to challenge such sweeping generalizations. Luther and Calvin both emphasized the historical revelation in Jesus Christ, and they definitely sought to turn the interest away from the unrevealed will of God to the will of God revealed in the gospel of the historical Christ.

In a brief analysis of the Westminster Confession the author, in the same vein, finds that in it

God is both supreme substance and sovereign will. He is not only the Creator and Preserver of all things, but through His Bible, His Church, His Christ, He brings His greatness to bear directly upon the littleness of the

creature and makes it possible for finite man, even here and now, to attain to an experience of the Infinite.

This Dr. Brown does not approve of, and in an expository criticism he says:

Here we have a conception of God which is at once *a priori* and ontological. *A priori* because its essence is made to consist in abstract conceptions divorced from experience, ontological because the Absolute Being thus obtained is conceived as the supreme reality. God is at once removed from all rational tests known to the creature and yet at the same time is conceived as entering into his experience. . . . Question and denial are alike impious.

If it be granted that in this confession the historical Christ is not made fundamentally central but rather the Father, yet this is true also of the earliest confessions. Belief in God, the Father Almighty, was the first article in the first personal confessions used in the churches, of which we have any knowledge. And if we may believe the recorded account Jesus himself declared the first and greatest commandment to be, There is one God, and thou shalt love him with all thy heart. Can a confession of faith be said to be built up from an *a priori* point of view and from abstract conceptions when the contents are taken from the most ancient and authoritative records of a historical revelation, and when the Almighty is thought of not only as Creator but as Providence, and not only as the Father of Jesus Christ but as our Father, by whom, in the language of the confession, we are "pitied, protected, provided for, and chastened . . . as by a father"? It looks here as if Dr. Brown were analyzing history from a point of view. Even here it is not his positives which will be objected to, but the sweeping implications of his negatives. Little standing place seems to be left for those who may not see the truth from the same point of view occupied by himself—which of course is farthest from Dr. Brown's purpose and temper. But divine personality, dominated by the ethical elements of fatherhood, must not be characterized as an abstract conception.

But these first chapters are hardly more than introductory. The strongest part of the book is the treatment of the modern period, covering the last hundred years (pp. 112-287). In the chapters "On the Critical Philosophy and the Awakening of the Historical Spirit;" "The Definition of Schleiermacher;" "The Hegelian Conception and New Hegelianism;" "Ritschl and the Ritschlian School," the author has given us some fine analytical writing. The temper here also is admirable. There is not a false note.

For good or evil, he declares, it is through Kant that the new point of view becomes dominant in modern thought, and no phase of it he thinks is more true than in the case of religion. To the influence of Kant is due pre-eminently the fact that our modern study of religion deals so largely with psychological questions.

Side by side with the philosophical influence arose the historical spirit, or that effort to conceive of life as a whole and in all its parts, according to the principle of growth. Out of the discussions awakened by Lessing and Herder we see gradually emerging the question, What is essential Christianity? Does it include all that has come down to us under that name, or must it be confined to the teaching of Christ himself in distinction from his disciples?

His study of Schleiermacher, whom he terms the father of modern scientific theology, is one of the best in the book. Into the cold, abstract, rationalistic world of Kant came Schleiermacher with the gospel of the sovereignty of the religious feeling. Religion is neither doctrine nor ceremony; it is experience. It is the discovery of the infinite in the very midst of the finite as that on which it depends and in which it exists, which makes out the essence of the religious life. Because religion is so grounded in human nature, a scientific conception of any particular religion is possible, and dogmatics becomes a historic discipline.

In Ritschl we see German theology returning to the path marked out by Schleiermacher and from which it had been diverted for a time by the Hegelian movement. The author with true analytical insight indicates the agreements and differences of Schleiermacher and Ritschl. They both emphasize the world at hand in Christian experience, but Ritschl differs from Schleiermacher in his view of the nature of that experience. The taint of subjectivism in Schleiermacher's doctrine is repugnant to Ritschl, who comes to theology from a study of history, which gives to his work as a theologian an objectivity which the theology of Schleiermacher lacks. To Ritschl, says Dr. Brown, Christianity exists as an objective reality in history; and the peculiar character of the Christian experience, as distinct from that of the mystic, is that the former is called into being only through contact with this specific reality. In contrast with what he calls the emotional element emphasized by Schleiermacher, and the intellectual elements made prominent by Hegel, Ritschl insists on the ethical element in the Christian experience. To be a Christian means to him a life of active devotion and service to God.

Ritschl, in distinction from Schleiermacher and Hegel, maintains that it is not possible to construct an adequate definition of religion apart from Christianity. In Ritschl we get the basis for theological activity by attaching the terminology directly to the apostolic circle of ideas, and he considers it a mistaken purism when anyone prefers the less developed statement of Jesus to the form of apostolic thought. The author also gives Ritschl's definition of Christianity. Christianity is the monotheistic, completely spiritual and ethical religion which, based on the life of the author as redeemer and as founder of the kingdom of God, consists in the freedom of the children of God, includes the impulse to conduct from the motive of love, aims at the moral organization of mankind, and grounds blessedness on the realization of sonship to God, as well as on the kingdom of God.

He also gives enough attention to Ritschl's doctrine of *Werthurtheile* to declare that Ritschl is not guilty of such shallowness as careless critics have ascribed to him, as if God were a mere imagination invented by man in his need to console himself with the dream of deliverance.

And he declares that taking the Absolute in the broad sense, as meaning the ultimate reality, no theologian of our day has a stronger sense of the absoluteness of Christianity than Ritschl.

He also calls attention to the energy with which Ritschl emphasizes the fact that the Christian experience is called forth by a certain definite object and the clearness with which he turns to define the nature of that object. But if to emphasize Christ as the definite object of a personal and conscious trust in him be that which lays Ritschl open to the charge of subjectivism, we should judge it well to have as much of such subjectivity as possible in theology and practice.

Of two representatives of the opposing tendencies coming from Ritschl, the author finds that Kaftan sees Christianity as essentially a supernatural religion in sharp contrast with all natural religions, having its only adequate explanation in a special divine revelation of wholly exceptional character; so that to understand Christianity is to experience it, and any proof which ignores this fact is bound to fail. Troeltsch, on the other hand, rejects the special supernaturalism and sees in Christianity but a chapter in the larger religious history. Religion is as wide as life, so that Troeltsch practically turns back to the earlier point of view of Schleiermacher and Hegel.

Dr. Brown surprises us by speaking of Lipsius, of all Ritschl's

contemporaries, as the one who stands on the whole closest to him. Of course it is true that in his later years Lipsius came gradually nearer to Ritschl's position, and placed the person of Christ above the consideration of the mere truth which he taught. He also emphasized the fact that *Werthurtheile* are not to be placed in contrast to *Seinurtheile*. Dr. Brown rightly places Kähler in an independent position, and not in the class with Ritschl as was done in Professor Orr's classification.

He concludes his historical survey with a sympathetic exposition of Harnack's *Essence of Christianity*, in which he does full justice to Harnack's positive views while omitting his negatives. Harnack conceives of Christianity as unique, adaptable, and universal. With him, to understand Christianity means to know Christ, who is the center of Christianity. The gospel presents eternal truth in historically changing forms, so that we are to find the common element in all the varying appearances of historical forms and test this by the gospel. Conversely also we must bring the principles of the gospel to the test of history. Both together will give us the truth. Dr. Brown thinks that here we see a broadening out which will make room for the truth for which Hegelianism stands.

In his closing chapter, which he calls "Retrospect and Prospect," he finds that there are two classes of definitions, according to the relative prominence which they give to the natural or the supernatural in their estimates of Christianity; so that the problem of getting a definition of Christianity that shall satisfy everybody is at bottom the problem of the reconciliation of these two divergent agents; of finding a conception which shall be at once supernatural and natural, and which shall exhibit the distinctive features of Christianity in their universal relation and significance. Much progress, he thinks, has been made, and he believes that the differences are now rather of emphasis and of proportion and not of a fundamental character.

He admits that thus far he has only indicated the conditions of the problem, but he believes that modern scholarship has brought us unexpected help to the answer; and that in restoring Jesus of Nazareth to his rightful place in Christian thought and life it has taken the greatest single step in the direction of a scientific definition of Christianity. With his supremacy in the religious life of humanity its claim to be the final religion stands or falls. Would we express in a sentence what makes out the genius of Christianity as a historic religion, we cannot do better, he declares, than by saying that it is the progressive realization in thought, as in life, of the supremacy of Christ. And in this idea



he thinks the two great conceptions of Christianity, whose conflict has so long engaged us, may well find their reconciliation; that, on the one hand, Hegel is right when he conceives of Christianity as a universal process in which all things minister to a single end; and, on the other, the attempt to destroy dogmatic Christianity is to give place to the fruitful effort to understand it. The noble spirit which animates the book as a whole is well seen when the author here concludes that what we need is the spirit of Christ; not denunciation, but insight; not polemic, but sympathy. He pleads for the turning from external differences and a concentration of thought in the direction of internal and fundamental agreement; that in all churches, as among those who stand outside of all, we may find the men who have been touched by the spirit of Jesus and in the forms natural to their day and place strive to realize the ends for which he gave his life. And he is sure that when we have done this we shall have found the essence of Christianity.

Dr. Brown here gives what he calls a summary, but leaves us in doubt whether it is put forth as his own goal:

Christianity, as modern Christian thought understands it, is the religion of divine sonship and human brotherhood revealed and realized through Jesus Christ. As such it is the fulfilment and completion of all the earlier forms of religion and the appointed means for the redemption of mankind through the realization of the Kingdom of God. Its central figure is Jesus Christ, who is not only the revelation of the divine ideal for man, but also, through the transforming influence which He exerts over His followers, the most powerful means of realizing that ideal among men. The possession in Christ of the supreme revelation of God's love and power constitutes the distinctive mark of Christianity and justifies its claim to be the final religion.

He admits, however, that he cannot tell what the new theology is to be. But of one thing he is sure; it will be a theology for the people. It will have its roots deep in life and will utter its message in language so simple and direct that the layman as well as the theologian can understand it. His closing sentence shows that the general trend of the book is homiletic rather than doctrinal.

Deeds count for more than words. In the world's high debate concerning Christianity, the missionary is the true apologist.

This is certainly true; but it is not the definite and scientific end we had been led to expect. The problem for the solving of which we have followed him is not to learn what constitutes the Christian, but Christianity. Christianity is not our experience, but that which pro-

duces our experience and justifies our estimate of it, and without which as rational beings we could not continue to have the experience. If theology is to be stated in terms of life rather than in terms of thought, it would seem to be an abandonment of his attempt to solve the problem. The two cannot be compared, and they are not to exist apart. We certainly can heartily agree that theology should be concrete and for our own age; but it should never be distressingly indistinct or elusive. It is always primarily theory and not practice, and needs no apology for it. It is enough that it be correct and scientific theory, and lead into wisely devoted life. And we hardly need to be reminded that life, after all, is not muscular but mental. To imply, therefore, that the scientific grasp of truth is of less importance than the practical activities of the every-day Christian, is the practical desertion of the theological field and the making of Christian sociology the goal of all our attempts to attain to the Christian idea of God and the world.

Dr. Brown does not mean this, but by going beyond his historical study, which is certainly a valuable one, and then failing to give something definite and conclusive, his book seems to run out into the mists and shadows. The only adequate explanation would seem to be that he has intended this volume simply as an introductory study, which he purposes to follow by another that shall settle all these questions from his own point of view. We need not assure Dr. Brown that we shall give such a book a hearty welcome.

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#### THE EXCAVATION OF NIPPUR.<sup>1</sup>

In the concluding chapter of *Nippur*, published in 1897, are these words:

How successfully Mr. Haynes carried out the work which he had planned, in his long and arduous excavations, covering three years, . . . and what wonderful treasures he unearthed, he has related in another volume. (Vol. II, p. 372.)

The reference was to a volume by Dr. Haynes, the manuscript of which was reported at that time as complete, and which was announced by

<sup>1</sup> *Explorations in Bible Lands during the Nineteenth Century*. By H. V. HILPRECHT, with the co-operation of LIC. DR. BENZINGER, PROF. DR. HOMMEL, PROF. DR. JENSEN, PROF. DR. STEINDORFF. Philadelphia: Holman & Co., 1903. xxiv + 793 pages. \$4.